

Pandemic Literature: Envisioning Catastrophe in Soderbergh's *Contagion*

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Abstract— *Pandemics are biological crises that pack a punch on the lives of every human being, regardless of the nation or race to which one belongs to. Whatever be the technological advancements man has made, pandemics have made a mockery of man's high claims by having the last laugh and wiping the lives of people in millions. Supplementing this, the pandemic literature is opulent with biographies, fictions, memoirs, testimonies and movies which narrate the life, survival and death of human species. The pandemic literature probes into the lives of individuals and the reconnoitred information makes the pages of history. More than this, literature has the earmarks of predicting or prophesying the future. One of the finest examples for this is the movie Contagion. The movie rightly insinuates the present global situation and reasserts the plight of human nature where a microscopic organism plays its game.*

Keywords— *Pandemic Literature, Film, Crisis, Contagion, Apocalyptic.*

"If anything kills over 10 million people in the next few decades, it's most likely to be a highly infectious virus rather than a war. Not missiles, but microbes."

Bill Gates, *Ted Talks*

I. INTRODUCTION

Being mankind's oldest deadly enemy, pandemics has always been a major theme since man's invention of literature. Turning the pages of the past, one can see that various infectious diseases have devoured man and have devastated the normal routine of life. In particular, they have contributed greatly to the genre of horror; be it written or visual art with the intention of startling or scaring the public. Pandemic literature exists not merely to probe the causes for the pestilence. What is so salient about the literature of illness and pandemic is its endeavour to forge a sense of meaning out of the raw experience of fear, hopelessness and agony. Narrative is an attempt to obviate this meaninglessness and when pandemic takes a break, literature serves the purpose of trying, however desperately, to stop the bleeding.

In the European literature, no such work is more venerating than Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, which was written during the 14th century and has frame story containing 100 stories. His protagonists, seven women

and three men, retreat to a villa outside Florence to avoid the pandemic "Black Death" (The Plague), which ravaged Europe in the mid-14th century. Isolated for two weeks, they while away time by telling each other stories that are vivacious, bizarre and at times filthy stories with a different theme for each day. Gothic stories like Bram Stoker's *Dracula* or stories of werewolves often had a contagious integrant; and canonized works of Victorian horror centred on the fear of contamination and illness. A bite from a malicious host transformed a poor victim into a horrendous creature, catatonic during the day but rapacious for a bloody meal at night. As films gained prominence in the 20th century, a solid accentuation on the themes of plague and apocalypse developed. Analysing the infection motif in movies, one comes to understand that it represents a metaphor for societal concerns, and aids in framing challenging issues for a wider audience. Science, fantasy and imagination blends together and creates a vision which in reality, foretells the very future of mankind, as has been envisioned in the film *Contagion*.

II. ENVISIONING CATASTROPHE IN SODERBERGH'S CONTAGION

The film *Contagion* is based on a deadly virus, MEV-1, that proliferates and infects people all over the world in a matter of days (Soderbergh, 2011). The construction crew from Beth Emhoff's company AIMM cuts down the trees in a forest in China, thereby destroying the habitat of the bats and compelling them to fly out from there. One of the bats seems to be infected with the virus MEV-1. It grabs a piece of banana and perches above a pigsty. It then drops the banana piece which is assumed to be laden with virus. A pig eats it and is eventually slaughtered at the market for food. It is brought to a casino in Macau to be prepared for someone's dinner. It is handled by the chef there and he touches the inside of the infected pig's mouth with his bare hands. He then goes out to the dining room, shakes hands with Beth and poses for a picture with Beth holding hands, thus transferring the virus to her and triggering a chain of events.

With almost documentary precision, a series of small, perturbing episodes befall, thereby creating an eerie atmosphere to the viewers. Beth returns home to Minneapolis from Macau, seemingly jet-lagged. But it takes a virulent turn, her condition worsens and in two days she dies from a mysterious disease. Her young boy Clark soon follows. More cases break out around the world. Public alarm sets in. Mitch Emhoff, Beth's husband is unable to bury his wife and youngest child because the mortuary refuses to take infected bodies. However, he seems to have developed immunity naturally for MEV-1 virus and is really worried about his surviving daughter Jory. Dr. Ellis Cheever, the chief of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Rear Admiral Lyle Haggerty assign Epidemic Intelligence Service officer, Dr. Erin Mears, to control the viral outbreak in Minneapolis. It is from her that one comes to know of the disease's incredible ability to multiply, incubate, and kill at a rate faster than most of the previously known diseases. As the number of infected reaches millions, Dr Hextall by using an attenuated virus develops a potential vaccine. To catalyze the vaccine development, Hextall bypasses the informed consent test subject process and instead injects herself with the experimental vaccine. She then visits her infected father. Luckily, she does not contract MEV-1 and the vaccine is declared a success. Later, one can see that the CDC awards vaccinations by lottery based on birthdates.

Soderbergh's film is a revealing and eerily haunting examination of the subject and was intended to realistically

convey the "intense" and "unnerving" social and scientific reactions to a pandemic. The protagonist is the pandemic whose exponential growth transports the narrative from location to location. *Contagion* confronts reality head on and is a brief against magical thinking. Steven Soderbergh wanted to make an "ultra-realistic" film that had focus on public health and scientific response to a pandemic. The "hyperlink style" (often switching back and forth from geographically distant places and persons) of the film, emphasizes the historically new perils of contemporary networked globalization and also the eternal qualities of the human condition (recalling famous literary treatments of epidemics, such as Albert Camus' *The Plague*).

The movie deals with a variety of themes, including the factors that sets off mass panic, the demise of social order, the scientific procedures for containing and characterizing a novel virus, balancing personal motives with professional ethics and responsibilities, the limitations and consequences of public health responses, and the pervasiveness of interpersonal connections which acts as vectors for pandemic. In *Contagion*, paranoia reaches its pinnacle. The quotidian social activities like personal and professional meetings; that make economic and social life pleasurable paradoxically becomes the machinery of doom. For instance in the movie, a teenage boy and girl, trying to spend some intimate time together, are reduced to wriggling side by side in the snow. As the boy at last, rolls onto the girl for a kiss; he gets pulled off roughly by her father. Mass panic is witnessed in the film when people rush to purchase forsythia when it is said to be a cure for the virus. There is almost a stampede to buy as much as each person can hold, and there is no thought of limiting the amount that each person can buy, thus whipping up a frantic demand for the medicine.

In *Contagion* the physicians are depicted as altruistic and caring, but with typical human flaws. In a hospital scene, a dying Dr. Mears hands over her jacket to a neighbouring patient suffering from rigors. In contrast, Dr. Cheever's decision to disclose classified information exposes his frailty. When challenged, he states: "I did it because I have loved ones, and I would do it again in a heartbeat." In a later scene, one can see him inoculating his service staff's son in lieu of taking the vaccination himself. Then we have Dr Leonora Orantes, a WHO (World Health Organization) Epidemiologist in Geneva, Switzerland. She tracks the disease's origins in Hong Kong, but unfortunately finds herself held for ransom by Su Feng and taken to his village

where his people are under quarantine, to assure that one of the limited vaccine supplies reaches its way to the village. But when she is told that it is a fake vaccine, she rushes to warn the villagers as she has developed a bond with them. It is unknown if she survived the pandemic.

In addition to the scientist characters, the movie features a self-serving blogger and conspiracy theorist, Alan Krumwiede. Being a freelance journalist too, Krumwiede complains online that the C.D.C. is ignoring an effective homeopathic cure and colluding with big pharmaceutical companies on a pseudo drug cure so as to make a profit with them. He does some ambiguous meetings with a mutual fund manager. His controversial writings ignite scepticism and trigger the panic-stricken people towards a possible (but unverified) miracle cure. He could be a heroic truth teller or a populist champion; but he could be a rancorous loser too - cloaking his personal chagrin in left-wing tirades. Looting and violence is on the loose and there is wide spread fear at the time of pandemic, the state borders are shut down and the government warns its citizens against social contact. As the film critics state, Krumwiede, spreading panic and distrust, is a stage of the disease. Until the end, his motives remain enigmatic.

The film presents instances of collective behaviour and crowd psychology which can trigger social anarchy and mass hysteria. The chaos, outrage, and vulnerability associated with lack of information, plus the influx of new media such as blogs and citizen journalism, allows conspiracy theorists like Krumwiede to spread misinformation and hysteria, amidst the people. In the case of Dr. Cheever, she must do the juggling act of disclosing complete data of the pandemic disclosure, avoid a panic in the society, and acquire ample time to analyse and understand an unknown virus. Lawlessness is exhibited in Chicago, when violence and robbery is in rife where quarantine is imposed. The film's depiction of panic and scapegoating can be viewed as most analogous to what is happening today.

The dialogues are filled with accurate medical facts, making the movie as a harbinger for an impending catastrophe. The characters in *Contagion* makes explicit reference to terms and concepts used in the public health practice of communicable disease control viz. R0, quarantine, hygiene, social distancing and so on. The basic reproductive number "R0" (also called R-naught of a virus) is prominently referenced in the film's dialogue, which correctly identifies it as the number of new infections

transmitted by a single infected individual. Early in the MEV-1 epidemic, Dr. Mears details to the local health officials that identifying the R0 for the infection is crucial for calculating its potential capacity. In a bit complex manner, Mears indicates the constituents of the R0 for any infection viz. frequency of personal contacts within a population, probability of transmission during contacts, and the incubation period of the virus. "The R0 of the fictional MEV-1 virus was 4, while the R0 of coronavirus is 2.2, according to a recent study of data from the first cases of Covid-19 in Wuhan and investigations conducted by Chinese and American health officials" (NCBI). *Contagion* also centres on the most ubiquitous and evidence based approach to diminish the rate of transmission: hand hygiene. The emphasis on this controlled measure occurs alongside the more hyped strategies of vaccine experimentation and new methods of curing. When Dr. Mears reprimands her support staff in the film ("Stop touching your face!") and various staffs of the Centres for Disease Control (CDC) are seen scrupulously applying alcohol gels on to their hands, they are conveying valuable public health information to the public - a message as significant as the frightening symptoms of MEV-1. It is really startling to state the MEV-1 virus in *Contagion* has the traits similar to that of the CoViD-19, and thereby making the viewer's realise how the virus works its way into its host.

The movie implicitly critiques the avarice, egotism, and hypocrisy of isolated acts in contemporary culture and the ramifications they can cause in the context of a pandemic. For instance, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention recommends social distancing by forcibly isolating the healthy to limit the spread of the disease, which stands in stark opposition to contemporary demands for social networking. Responding to the pandemic presents a paradox, as the lethality and contagiousness of the virus disseminates deep distrust of others, to check the onslaught of the pandemic, one requires to work together with others.

The story also highlights examples of political cronyism. For instance, a plane to evacuate Dr. Mears from Minneapolis is instead diverted to evacuate a politician. Similarly we can witness platitudes and rigid thinking from the part of the authorities. For example, public health officials consider postponing the closing of shopping malls until after the Thanksgiving shopping season. Federal responders try to navigate fifty separate state-level public health policies, and one can see the heroism of Federal bureaucrats being exhibited in the movie. Soderbergh does not employ stereotypical pharmaceutical executives or

politicians as villains instead portrays bloggers such as Krumwiede in a negative light, thus giving us a picture about how people fish in troubled waters.

Portrayal of media needs to be specially mentioned in the movie as it replicates the very same scenario in the times of CoVid 19. In today's times, the media are often accused of hyperbolizing the risks of an epidemic and contributing to public's misconceptions about public health research. The Internet, another means of getting connected universally, becomes a kind of plague too. Media reporting at times can have a boomerang effect, whereby it lowers the trust in scientific evidence, whips up public fear and propagandizes instantaneously fake information; which is capitalized by Alan Krumwiede when he states that Forsythia, a homeopathic drug, is the medicine for MEV-1. Likewise, when the world was frantically on the lookout for CoVid 19 cure, social media propagandized Arsenicum album 30C, a homeopathic drug, as medicine for CoVid 19. Media coverage can directly have an effect on public risk perceptions, and recent studies have proved that media-triggered public disquietude may influence health-related personal measures taken during the time of contagion. This was evident when the media declared that Hydroxychloroquine as a cure for CoVid infection. However, it does not mean that is media reporting is all bad. International scientific literature has stated that during the recently happened epidemics, the media has played a pivotal role in creating a positive approach on disease perception and immunization campaigns, in particular.

III. CONCLUSION

The film prophesies that, at any moment, our advanced civilization could be on the verge of extinction, exacerbated precisely by what is considered as the most advanced species. The movie also shows us something else: the heroic works by scientists and Homeland Security officials. One cannot help noticing that with two exceptions - a French doctor who works for the World Health Organization (Dr. Leonora Orantes) and a renegade epidemiologist in San Francisco (Dr. Ian Sussman) - the heroes are all employees of the federal government, and instinctively factual people. No one prays, no one calls on God. *Contagion* does not have any spiritual dimension - except for its perfervid faith in science and logical reasoning. The movie says that "When there's real trouble, we're in the hands of the reality-based community. No one else matters".

When confronted with the unpredictability of aetiology, the randomness of illness, the arbitrariness of infection, one must be content with the realization that we are not rulers of this world. We have apparently become such masters of nature that we have altered its very climate and geologists have nomenclated our epoch after humanity itself. Yet, a sub microscopic virus can be more devastating than an entire army. Disease is not metaphor, symbol, or allegory; it is something that simply kills anyone without any consideration. Story is a way of attempting to impart a bit of that consideration which nature ignores. And *Contagion* does justice in that.

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